

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell, February 17, 1894, with transcript

The Question of Sign-language.

Some Remarks upon Mr. Jenkins' Paper. by, Alexander Graham Bell. February 17th, 1894.

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To the Editor of the Education:—

You have invited me to make a few remarks concerning Mr. Jenkins' communication upon the “Question of Signs” published in the Educator for December 1893; and also to express my own views upon the subject.

In your Editorial notes upon “The Sign-language Defined”, published in the same number of the Educator, you say — and very truly I think:—

“There is as such difference between ‘Signs’ and a ‘Sign-language’ as between ‘Bricks’ and a ‘Brick-house’”.

Now, it seems to me that the question raised by Mr. Jenkins is not so much a question of “Signs” as of “Sign-language”: For no one objects to the use of the gestures (or “Signs”) employed by ordinary hearing and speaking people, when used in the same way that they employ them, as mere accompaniments of English words, whereas very many people

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do object, as I do, to the employment of Signs — as a language — for the expression of ideas, quite independently of English.

Mr. Jenkins however, expresses the opinion that the De l'Epee 2 Sign-language is not a language at all, in the true sense of that term, although we call it so, in a loose sort of way just as we speak of “The language of the Stars”, the “Language of Flowers” &c, For example he says:—

“It is customary among us to speak of the ‘Sign-language’, or the ‘Language of Signs’ but language is that which belongs to the tongue, Lingua ;: it is the utterance of vocal speech. In a remote, modified, accommodated sense, we may call it a language, just as we speak of the Language of Flowers, the Language of the Eyes, the Language of the Stars, or any other non-oral method of communication”.

Mr. Jenkins is certainly in error in thus seeking to limit the legitimate use of the word “Language” to “The utterance of vocal speech” alone; for reference to the dictionary will show that it includes, “the expression of ideas by writing, or any other instrumentality”. (Webster.)

As we can express ideas through the instrumentality of the De l'Epee Sign-language alone, without recourse to English, we are justified, I think in claiming, not only that it is a “Language” (In the correct and proper use of that term — not in a loose sense), but that it is a distinct language — as distinct from English as French, or German or any other spoken tongue —

Mr. Jenkins says:—

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“There is no especial objection to the phrase ‘Sign-language’ unless an attempt be made to raise it to the dignity of a spoken language, and thus conceive of it as coming into competition with the National speech, which its proper normal use never permits it to do”.

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The fact is patent, however, and has never been denied that it becomes the ordinary and usual means of communication — the “Vernacular” so to speak — of many of our pupils; so that, as a matter of fact, it does come into competition with the National speech, whatever “its proper, normal use” may be. Pupils certainly are not sent to school to acquire as their vernacular, a language not understood by the people among whom they live. That such a language should be employed as a means of communications and instruction in our public schools is contrary to the spirit and practice of American Institutions (as foreign immigrants have found out) : and it requires much stronger arguments than any employed by Mr. Jenkins to justify so un-American a proceeding in the case of the In my opinion necessity alone could justify it; and necessity certainly has not been shown.

Mr. Jenkins says that even if we admit that the De l'Epee Sign-language does constitute a “Language”, in the true acceptation of that term, there is nothing at all improbable in children “acquiring two languages”; and he claims that this is actually done in the Sign Schools; though why it should be necessary for deaf children to acquire two languages where one alone is sufficient he fails to state.

When I received your note, requesting me to write this article, I was under the impression that Mr. Jenkins' paper contained some argument in favor of the use of the De l'Epee Language of Signs. I am surprised therefore to find, upon careful perusal of his paper, that there is no such argument there. The sum and substance of what he says appears to me to be as follows:—

The Sign-language is not a language. If it is, then deaf children can learn two; and they do in Sign Schools.

Poor English is found in Oral, as well as in Sign Schools.

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If there be any argument here in favor of the Sign-language, it must surely be found in the last point named; which Mr. Jenkins considers of sufficient importance to be termed “the nux of the whole question”. He says:—

“All the errors peculiar to deaf-mutes, in schools where Signs are used, are found in the composition of pupils taught under the Oral Method. This is the nux of the whole question”.

Of course lack of familiarity with the English language is, of itself, a sufficient cause for poor English; but it would not account for the appearance of peculiarities of expression apparently copying the idioms of the De l'Epee language of 5 Signs. If by “errors peculiar to deaf-mutes” he means to assert, that peculiarities of this sort are to be found in the compositions of pupils taught under the Oral Method, it would be a most interesting circumstance, well worthy of investigation; but not, I think, of any special importance in connection with the present subject; because, even if true, it does not afford a reason why the Sign-language should be employed in the education of the deaf. The utmost result claimed, even by Mr. Jenkins, is as follows:—

“If this can be proved true, then the constant charge against Signs as the cause of pigeon English must fall to pieces”.

It will thus be seen that in the culminating part of his whole argument he simply seeks to claim that the Sign-language does not do as much harm as is commonly supposed; but this is not an argument showing that any advantage arises from its use.

Mr. Jenkins, it is true, expresses the opinion that the graduates of schools that employ the Sign-language are better educated than those of Oral schools. This of course would be an argument in favor of sign-language if it were established by facts; but Mr. Jenkins offers no evidence in its support. The experience of the Pennsylvania Institution certainly does not justify his conclusion. It is well known that a careful comparison of results obtained in the Oral and Manual Departments of that School, revealed the fact that the 6 pupils of the

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Oral Department, were not inferior to those of the other in their general education, and ability to use written English; while they were superior in their ability to use and understand speech.*

* Dear Mr. Booth:— As I have no Reports of the Penn. Inst. here that give me a quotation, to from my statement, would it not be well for you to affirmed an Editorial first note endorsing the assertion as a fact, you might for example referred and ask him whenever it is correct, an his reply in the form of a first note (A.G.B.)

It cannot be denied that many deaf persons have obtained an excellent education with a good command of English — in both its spoken and written forms — without any recourse to the De l'Epee Language of Signs.

They are to be found among the graduates of Oral, Schools, Manual Alphabet Schools (like the Rochester School), and the pupils of private teachers.

Helen Keller is a notable case in point — with which every one is familiar; and i may also cite the case of Miss Maud Jones, of English, (daughter of Sir Willoughby Jones) because she was deaf from birth. Her letters, as well as, her conversation, show that she has acquired as complete a mastery of the English language as that possessed by any hearing person.

If then a good education, with a good command of the English language, can be obtained without any recourse to the De l'Epee language of Signs, the question naturally arises, what need is there for the latter at all? But Mr. Jenkins does not touch this point.

In conclusion allow me to say that if it is not necessary, it is obviously not advisable, that deaf children should acquire, and use, as their ordinary and habitual means of communication — their vernacular in fact — a language that is not understood by the people among whom they live.

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I have a great deal more that I could say upon this subject, but in my opinion this is sufficient: And I feel myself placed in the position of the counsel who was called upon by the judge to show cause why his client had not appeared in court when summoned to attend.

“Please your Honor”, said he, “I have twenty one reasons to present, to account for the absence of my client in this case”. “Let us hear them”, said the judge. “Well, in the first place, he died this morning; and” — “Hold on”, said the judge, “that'll do. We'll waive the other twenty reasons” — and dismissed the case.

In another article I shall be glad to state my own views concerning “The Utility of Signs”, as you request.

(Signed) Alexander Graham Bell.